

## Fallout 3

Kirk Battle

Fallout 3 is a bold attempt at creating an emergent narrative. It is a careful blend of branching RPG dialogue trees, emergent gameplay, and a vast space to explore. Relying on neither a purely procedural system nor a linear one, it comes the closest to achieving what Espen Aarseth originally conceived of in his book *Cybertexts*. The game is an ergodic text, whose details and characters are found and explored in any sequence.

The original *Fallout* tempered its player experience by having the needs of the Vault be in conflict with the outside world. You have to collect the water chip in a set amount of time, forcing you to choose between stealing the chip or fixing the water pump for the ghouls living in Necropolis. The Vault's xenophobic isolation is reflected in groups like the Brotherhood of Steel who won't accept outsiders and the Super Mutants, who wish to use the FEV virus to mutate all that remains of humanity. The sequel to *Fallout* was much more broad and humorous, dealing with the difficult question of how the world should progress after nuclear war. The Enclave are the remnants of the United States government yet in order for them to reassert and rebuild, most of the people in the Wasteland need to die off. After hours of dealing with gangs, slavers, mutants, ghouls, and violence, the game's ultimate question is whether or not it is even possible to go back to the way America used to be. Alan Cook[103] comments that the one consistent theme in all of the games is the idea of the player being a rarity due to their education. He writes, "Their secret knowledge of what came before, modern technology, science, and history make them all-powerful in a powerless world. The post-apocalyptic world knows nothing of the world that was, that perfect utopia. They know a poisonous, hostile world. Only the hero truly knows the breath of human knowledge. Can he use it to save them all?" If there is a basic question that drives every game in the series, it's whether or not there is much one can do to help after the bombs drop.

*Fallout 3* builds on these themes and brings its own take to the table. The main story quests draw heavily on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*[104]. In the book, an unknown disaster has kicked up a major dust cloud over the atmosphere and humanity is on the way to extinction. Most of the techniques for survival that are practiced in the book are core

gameplay mechanics in *Fallout 3*. The constant act of scavenging through boxes for whatever junk can be found is one of the most consistent activities in the game. Due to the scarcity of resources, most of the surviving people have turned to violence and cannibalism in the book. Raiders and Super Mutants leave evidence of their cannibalism throughout the game. There is even a stat boost for it if the player decides to try it for themselves. Food is almost always irradiated meat or canned. In the book, since most organic plants cannot survive, there is no other source of food besides cans or what few animals are alive.

In other ways the book is fairly different. *The Road* is essentially an extinction scenario, the human race is probably not going to make it, and the characters all struggle to find meaning in survival. The world of *Fallout 3* is passing out of this dark phase. After 200 years the radiation levels are beginning to fade and people are slowly able to carve out a real living. Blogger Ike Reeder[105] comments that the book's isolation simply cannot translate well into a video game. The Man and Boy have to avoid most of the people they meet because most people are stealing and killing to stay alive. In *Fallout 3* civilization is slowly beginning to rise up, albeit under martial law. What remains consistent is the same issue that Alan Cook brings up about all of the *Fallout* games: what can the person who knows the ways of technology and civilization bring to an area that is on the verge of barbarism? Is there even a point in trying to change things?

The emergent narrative focuses on giving as much authorial control to the player as possible. The difference between the two narrative aesthetics in games, linear or emergent, lies in their basic design principles. Jesper Juul explains in *Half-Real*, "We can outline two basic ways in which games are structured and provide challenges for players: that of emergence (a number of simple rules combining to form interesting variations) and that of progression (separate challenges presented serially). (5) The test for which category a game falls under is simple: when you get stuck do you look up a walkthrough of step by step solutions or a strategy guide? (71) The genre of game the emergent design creates is typically called a sandbox as a consequence of its open nature. You can do anything and go anywhere within the game's broad set of rules.

The enormous size of *Fallout 3*'s world contributes to one of the inherent limitations of the emergent narrative: it is impossible to explore all of it in one pass. Proceeding one way through a section of story means that the consequences of the other path are never explored. As the different outcomes slowly

combine along with choices about character development, the player begins to generate a unique experience for themselves. Speaking personally, many experiences I had in the game were recounted differently by other players. These choices are represented both in the game's rewards as well as the narrative. For example, help the old NPC Agatha find a better violin and she'll play it on the radio. Search through the Wasteland until you find some music sheets and she'll give you one of the best guns in the game. Players who choose to simply rob Agatha may end up with the same reward but with different feedback.

Blogger and game designer Steve Gaynor outlines in a series of posts on Immersive Gameplay[106] three levels of control in games. A player has a micro-level of control when all they are deciding is minute details. Which gun to use, how to tackle a combat situation, or which move is the best. Numerous action games like Modern Warfare 2 or God of War would fall into this category with their roller coaster aesthetics and setpieces. Mid-level control is picking whether or not to do a mission or making choices that effect the outcome of an event. Wide ranging RPG's like Mass Effect or Fallout 3 feature this design along with a growing trend in action games to have light RPG elements. High-level control is when the game exerts no authorial control whatsoever. Games like The Sims or Civilization, where the player can do anything under a broad set of rules, are the prime examples. As a game, Fallout 3 engages us with choices at all three levels.

These levels of control are complimented by having scaled goals in the game. Hirokazu Yasuhara, a senior design director at Namco Bandai Games explains in an interview with Gamasutra[107] that every game should maintain three levels of interesting goals for a player. Short goals are getting more ammo or defeating an enemy, mid-goals are getting to a checkpoint or beating a level, and long-goals is the overarching resolution of the game's narrative. The player must constantly be reminded of these goals in varying amounts depending on the range, the long one requiring constant reaffirmation to keep the story coherent. The emergent narrative, with its hands off approach, reminds the player of these goals by giving them be choices about how they will proceed.

Fallout 3 illustrates this principle elegantly in its tutorial. The vault is a contained space where you can quickly see the effects of your actions. You are born and offered a multitude of choices right from the start. The player is asked to first pick their gender and appearance. Subsequently stats are selected while they grow accustomed to moving about the world as a child. Preparing the player for engaging

with moral dilemmas is done with the G.O.A.T. exam, which postulates several bizarre hypotheticals to the player. Shooting and conversation are all taught as the player slowly gets older and explores the Vault. The final section of the tutorial begins when you turn 19 and are forced to pursue your Father. What is important about these moments is that it's giving the player a space to experiment and see how the system works. The success of *Fallout 3* as an emergent narrative begins with the tutorial because it trains the player to 'read' the ergodic text by showing how to interact with the story and seeing consequences pan out in minor ways. All of these choices are ultimately inconsequential, when exiting the Vault the game will ask you if you want to undo any of your stats before the doors seal semi-permanently.

In terms of reflecting the player's character choices, the game is both hit and miss. Your father's ethnicity will reflect the choices you make at the start of the game, keeping the immersion intact. As far as player interaction, the world is defaulted to assuming you are a male despite the gender choice at the beginning. Blogger Twyst points out that all clothes are in their male setup unless a female player puts them on, in which case they change shape. Almost all of the characters address you in either gender neutral or as a man (calling you "brother" or "man"), there are numerous audio and visual lapses including the ending where you are shown as a male.[108] The Black Widow perk, which gives you bonus damage against men and new dialogue options, only unlocks one new choice in the actual game. You can persuade someone to have sex with you so that they don't detonate a bomb. Attempts to address this issue in the Bethesda forums were shut down by a mod.[109] Simon Ferrari points out on a post about his playthrough as a woman that any attempts to argue the designers were trying to create a gender-neutral experience fall short because of the numerous design lapses. He also notes that it does contain its fair share of empowered female characters such as Agatha, Leaf Mother Laurel, and Paladin Lyons.[110] Women who are not defined by their relationship to a man include Moira in Megaton or Dr. Li in Rivet City. There are also plenty of prostitutes and women dependent on their husbands, but as Ferrari points out they are all characterized as being greedy and narcissistic. As broad and open as the game may be, being able to explore this world as a woman is a tacked-on feature.

The first overarching goal of *Fallout 3* supports exploration because the first half of the story is a mystery. Where has your Father gone?

Wandering around the ruins outside the Vault might lead you to Megaton but you could just as easily stumble onto a Raider Den up on the interstate or one of the abandoned buildings. The larger narrative of the game is always present but exploration leads you to side-missions that can be optionally resolved. In Megaton you might help Moira write a Survival Guide, deal with the active atomic bomb, or solve the City's leaky pipes. Rewards of experience and gear make this tempting to do at a short range choice level. Discovering your father's location, which is initially Rivet City, means you have to travel there. Each step of the way presents randomly generated combat, which encourages the player's engagement with short-term choices and goals like ammo or health. And like in Megaton, side-quests and stories continue to crop up as you make your way to the floating city. As game critic Mitch Krpata explains, "The wasteland is a massive canvas upon which are painted scenes of depth and import, most of which aren't story-critical but instead serve to flesh out the mythology." [111] There is still a long-goal present that the player is reminded about intermittently, but pursuing it leads to a huge range of mid-goals that the player can choose from.

In order to maintain mid-level narrative choice coherence, *Fallout 3* utilizes self-contained narrative spaces. To create appropriate feedback to the variety of choices a player may make, a developer has to program and write a response. This quickly becomes a massive undertaking as decision after decision piles up and complex reactions become necessary. To keep this manageable, a game will often have a self-contained drama or vignette that the player can interact with. In any one location I can kill off any or all NPC's if I choose, or instead interact with them. If you're playing a more cruel character, certain people will speak to you that normally would not. By the same token, being good attracts different conversations. Each of these points on the map are narratively unconnected, so that people in one community have little knowledge of what goes on in others.

The struggle for an emergent narrative is maintaining feedback for a player who is inherently unpredictable. It's not really possible to have a meaningful reaction to every possible act the player can do. Narrative weight is still given to certain major decisions outside certain vignettes though. The game incorporates third parties that often act as news sources to give feedback. When the player listens to Galaxy News Radio in *Fallout 3* Three Dog will report your comings and goings. Certain NPCs who would reasonably know about current events outside the

contained vignette will also make mention of your actions, such as when your father compliments you if you saved Megaton from the atomic bomb. Wearing certain pieces of clothing and being associated with certain groups will also adjust NPC behavior. If you talk the Ant Agonizer out of attacking the Mechanist in Canterbury Commons, then go see the Mechanist wearing her helmet, he'll attack you.

The nature of the emergent narrative as a space that is freely explored by the player also requires a certain degree of information redundancy. When a player asks an NPC to explain where they are, they will usually get a name and brief explanation before being told to ask a specific NPC. That NPC is the information hub of the town, often directing the player to important clues about any Quests or areas to explore. Other NPC's will often repeat this information. In the town of Canterbury Commons, for example, there are at least four people who will explain what's going on in the town. Often they will have their own take on this information, but it's usually not new after the first NPC. Since an emergent narrative does not control how the player enters the city or when, the game ensures the information will be conveyed by having the details crop up multiple times. In order to maintain the integrity of an emergent narrative, facts must often be repeated or localized so that there is a great chance the player will discover important details if they are inclined.

The game's setting evokes all of these narrative design techniques by filling the game with tiny details to flesh out the sense of place. Duncan Fyfe at Hit Self Destruct writes[112], "You can't ignore all the bombed-out highways, the bridges to nowhere, the irradiated waters, the torn-apart schools, the abandoned cars, the skeletal remains embracing on the beds of shattered houses, the random and meaningless firefights and explosions. That's the world, and you have to deal with it even when it has no quest relevance."

The sense of desolation is also reflected in the narratives of each town. Raider camps and Super Mutants wander the landscape, always attacking you on sight. Towns that have imposing sheriffs like Megaton or Little Lamplight are able to survive. Ones whose leaders have become old or weak, like Arefu or Big Town, are depicted as on the verge of collapse. In order to get the player to appreciate the need for every city to be filled with a strong leader, the landscape is incessantly hostile. Michael Clarkson argues[113] that the game is distinctly taking after Hobbes in its depiction of the primal state of nature. He writes, "In Leviathan, Hobbes asserts that men in the state of nature quarrel for three main reasons: resources, security, and renown...The central concern of the

main quest is the scarcity of water. Because nearly all the water in the wasteland is irradiated or otherwise contaminated, agriculture is practically impossible." In almost every town there is a local drunk who has chosen to drink themselves away than deal with the world. Raider Dens often have the remains of their victims strewn about. Many of the places you explore will have small ergodic scenes, a skeleton on a chair with a gun lying next to it or a pile of bodies holed up in a cave filled with mole rats. The player draws their own conclusions about these scenes, the story telling itself by leaving only clues.

The first major area that the player will encounter after leaving Vault 101 is Megaton. Picking your way around the Springvale ruins will inevitably end with the player noticing a large nearby structure, although they are free to try their luck elsewhere. The need for supplies and weapons will probably do more to control the narrative progress than any forced linearity. The town is a mixed group of people, which often becomes the case in each town you encounter. A drug addict runs the local restaurant. A cheerful mechanic runs the general store. When the player asks for clues about his father's whereabouts, the bar owner Colin Moriarty charges them for the information. A ghoul working for Moriarty is an indentured servant, and the local church, the Children of the Atom, sits in the main square worshipping an atomic bomb. While the sheltered life of the Vault was a bit disturbing, the town is interesting because many of the citizens think of you as insane despite their own crazy behavior. The player, as the only person who has been isolated from the cruelty of the Wasteland, is the only one with any kind of perspective on this situation.

The details that fill this town are all encountered in any order, but the picture they paint is always one of people struggling with whether or not they should just give into the cruelty around them. Moira keeps up a positive attitude and asks for your help writing a survival guide. Do so and you gain survival skills along with random encounters of people praising the book. Tell her it's hopeless and you win the dream crusher perk. One NPC in the town will offer to accompany you, but declines if your karma is not low enough. You can save yourself some money by just bullying Moriarty into telling you where your Dad went instead of paying him off. Megaton immediately presents the player with quests that represent the same choice outlined by Hobbes in *The Leviathan* and in *The Road*. Do you try to keep civilization together or just say screw it? Either path is viable.

One of the most discussed Quests in *Fallout 3* takes place in Megaton and it embodies the distinction between these two options. Do you want to detonate the nuke in Megaton or disarm it? Michael Clarkson comments on the context[114], "The character encounters the sinister Mr. Burke, who wants you to detonate a bomb in the middle of a settlement. Burke's dialogue is laughable, the sort of thing a 12-year-old would say if he were trying to be a suave villain." The only motivation for setting off the bomb is because Burke's employer TenPenny once commented that Megaton was an eyesore. If the player tries to do the moral thing of turning Burke in it leads to a confrontation with the sheriff Lucas Simms. Burke will shoot him in the back before running away. Trying to do the most moral thing by appealing to authority and helping Megaton ends in disaster. Just deactivating the bomb will still have Burke sacking Talon mercenaries on you at random intervals. Setting off the nuclear bomb, however, has its own curious response. When you do so the player is given an incredible scene of the bomb going off while Burke praises its beauty and TenPenny has a huge laugh. The player who commits this senseless act, one for which there is almost no justification, is going to have their sentiments echoed by either Burke or TenPenny. Their karma drops by 1000 points and the player will be attacked by Megaton survivors at random, but this first major choice of the game sets the stage for all the rest. Do you plan to just blow things up and have a laugh or work to make the Wasteland a better place? The latter is not always going to be simple.

These kinds of inadvertent consequences for doing the right thing are seen again in the TenPenny Tower Quest. The leader of a ghoul group, Roy Phillips, wants to move into the tower but the residents refuse because of racism or ignorance. That's what Phillips claims anyways. Once you meet the residents you realize that like Megaton they're a mixed group. One resident is Herbert Dashwood, a hero on the Galaxy News Radio programs and one of his best friends was a ghoul named Argyle. Four others, however, are repulsively snobby and expect the player to agree with their bigotry. TenPenny is more insane than offensive, while many of the other residents are simply misinformed. Help Phillips by unlocking the underground door to the Tower and the player will witness a disturbing ghoul rampage as the residents are slaughtered. Karma points deduct accordingly. What's difficult is that the player can also persuade the bigoted NPC's to leave and persuade the other Tower residents to accept the ghouls. The ghouls will move in peacefully, karma points go up. But if you come back a few days later, Phillips will have



decided to kill off the residents anyway, gruesomely piling their bodies in the basement. As in Megaton, doing the right thing does not always work out well in the Wasteland.

These two quests highlight the way that Fallout 3's karma system constantly complicates things instead of making them cut and dry. Quests will consistently confuse what is right and wrong with in-game rewards. Other times it will render the ludic prizes neutral or uninteresting while keeping the narrative engaging for the player. This is all compounded by the fact that you cannot ever check your karma (unless you're playing on a PC), you are only informed of it going up or down. For example, in "The Replicated Man" Quest the player is asked to track down a sentient android that has changed his face and memories. If the player chooses the karmically good path, they get one of the best weapons in the game. But if they opt to murder the men hunting him, they can trick out the bad karma reward and have the gain neutralized. The seemingly most positive path, showing false evidence that the Android is dead and leaving his false memories intact, has no reward for the player.

Another quest that confounds expectations is "Recovering Liberty", which features several layers of options. After either a long battle or taking a tricky shortcut, the player is confronted with a robot that believes it is Button Gwinnet from 1776. The robot will ask you to help it forge a copy of the Declaration of Independence to stop the British from stealing it. To help it you must recover an obscure bottle of ink at another distant location. The temptation to just shoot the robot and take the Declaration is large, the karmic cost is minimal and no one will care about one deranged robot. Other than the potential for more combat, there isn't really any other cost to doing this. The game's choices are always trying your patience as well as confounding you with their consequences.

The most conflicted choice in the game is found in "The Oasis" Quest. It features the reoccurring character Harold from the other *Fallout* games, whose viral mutation caused a tree to grow out of his head. In Fallout 3, the tree has finally taken root and begun to spread seeds to create a grove. When the player eventually stumbles upon the place up north, they will encounter the only green vegetation in the entire game. Harold, tired of his predicament and bizarre followers, asks the player to kill him. The leader of the Treeminders asks the player to apply a sap to slow his growth while another asks you to help spread it. Walking around the village only makes the decision more complicated in terms of narrative. Few of the followers actually listen to Harold, interpreting his talk to be metaphorical and religious. Some wish to spread

the grove to help the Wasteland while others fear attracting attention. None of the ludic rewards are particularly good, you get a permanent boost to stats so long as you don't talk the blatantly cruel path of lighting Harold on fire. Otherwise it's just some decent but not great armor or a minor improvement on radiation resistance. It is a truly perplexing choice because there is no right answer in terms of game design or narrative. The player is free to make up their own mind about what's right.

The main quest is littered with Quests that echo the main story. Presuming the player follows the trail of clues the game leaves behind to find their Father, they will inevitably encounter certain quests that are along the main routes to Rivet City. One of them touches on the very concern of abandonment that the player is experiencing: outside the town of Grayditch a small child approaches you. Believing his father to be dead, the child tries to get your help to see if anyone is still alive. In the sewers you find his father alive and well, but more concerned with his own research than his son. After helping him resolve a fire breathing ant problem, you're asked to find his son a new home instead of reuniting the pair. It's a clear echo of the awkward dilemma facing the player in their own quest. The player's father, whom during the tutorial raised them and taught them numerous skills, abandoned the player under similar circumstances. In Rivet City you encounter another problematic parent in the form of an alcoholic mother and her unruly son, something present in Vault 101 as well. Later, when the player is visiting Little Lamplight, they discover an entire city of children abandoned by their parents. The player's main quest is repeated in the minor quests they encounter along the way.

After rescuing your father from a virtual reality simulation, you discover that he is trying to repair a massive water filtration system located in the Jefferson Memorial. The necessity for such a device is apparent to the player throughout the game: all water and food is irradiated. After returning to the Jefferson Memorial your father begins repairing the project and asking for your assistance. The series of tasks given to the player here are almost banal in comparison to what they have done to make it this far. Disarming bombs, resolving conflicts, and fighting Super Mutants are all norms by this point. In these moments you feel like a child again, something that is inadvertently broken when the Enclave attack. After refusing to give over control of the water filter, your father causes a huge radiation leak to create a distraction so you and the other doctors can escape. With his death you are abruptly put in command, protecting everyone, which is made even more difficult as one of your

new party members reveals he has a heart condition. Suddenly, the player is now the authority figure.

Part of the problem with the Main Quest in these narrow moments is that even narratively they are somewhat contrived. Although having your Dad kill himself to take out a few Covenant officials is dramatic, the fact that he is dying to keep them from controlling a water filtration system makes the stakes seem low. It's not as if we're talking about a bomb or the Forced Evolution Virus (FEV) at this point, the Enclave simply declares that they want control of the facility. After several more quests involving the G.E.C.K. and dealing with the Enclave, the player is eventually put back into the same linear situation. Someone has to go into the irradiated control room and open up the water pump or the facility will break down. Rather than be able to send in one of your radiation resistant NPC's, you are forced to choose between going in yourself or sending in Paladin Lyons. You can also infect the water with the FEV virus if you want to kill off all mutants, but there's never much of an argument for why anyone would want to do this. Unlike all the complex choices and interactions of the entire game, in this final moment the player can only choose between good, bad, and really bad.

The DLC eventually fixed it so that the player simply goes into a coma and wakes up two weeks later, rendering the decision more palpable for people. Yet the final quest is not without some of its own eloquence. When you step into the irradiated chamber you have to put in the key code to unlock the pump controls. No one in the game has ever specifically told you what it is. In a long discussion at Gamers with Jobs Commenter Nyles explains[115], "The way I see it, figuring out the code is the game asking you: do you care about this story? And if you do, you know the code. If you don't, you go get a walkthrough, or look for a way to solve the puzzle with the tools at your disposal, which leads to annoyance and frustration." Countless times your father has recited the sequence to you when quoting your Mother's favorite Bible verse and it's even in your own notes, which are typically only there to enhance the story. In some ways, despite the linear design in this last section, it is the only time the game really engages the player with how they personally have been playing the game. Did you really care about the characters in this story or were you just going through the motions for the good ending?

Subsequent playthroughs of Fallout 3 invariably result in discovering the same quests in new ways or being able to unlock different details about the individual vignettes. Characters missed will be met and

weapons lost will change playing styles dramatically. Random encounters and clues skipped amongst the rubble change how you play each time. Many places throughout the game don't even have quests driving your progress. The abandoned Vaults tell their own stories simply through bodies, bits of old records, and shattered machinery. Blasted out factories that seem boring the first time visited will, on a return trip, lead you to noticing two skeletons clutching one another in a corner. None of these things are spelled out for the player. Often heartbreaking, occasionally funny, but never forgettable, the Capital Wasteland is a place that Fallout 3 successfully takes the player to and allows them to explore however they like. Its mystery only deepens each time you enter it anew.

#### ENDNOTES

- 104 <http://www.gamerswithjobs.com/node/43230>
- 105 <http://www.gameobserver.com/features/inside/all-platforms/gameobserver-interview-with-bethesda-softworks-130/>
- 106 <http://ikereeder.wordpress.com/2008/11/10/subsuming-the-ego/>
- 107 <http://fullbright.blogspot.com/2009/01/storymaking.html>
- 108 [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3769/game\\_design\\_psychology\\_the\\_full\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3769/game_design_psychology_the_full_.php)
- 109 <http://martianmsgs.blogspot.com/2009/02/fallout-3-annoyances.html>
- 110 <http://forums.theirisnetwork.org/viewtopic.php?f=12&t=1457&sid=fcc9fbce1f8d19226df58772713bd7b3>
- 111 <http://chungking.wordpress.com/2009/05/07/fallout3malefemale/>
- 112 <http://insultswordfighting.blogspot.com/2009/01/big-picture.html>
- 113 <http://www.hitselfdestruct.com/2008/11/escape-from-vault-101.html>
- 114 <http://mwclarkson.blogspot.com/2008/12/bellum-omnia-contranomnes.html>
- 115 <http://mwclarkson.blogspot.com/2008/11/theres-nothing-in-it-for-you.html>
- 116 <http://www.gamerswithjobs.com/node/43230>